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ABSTRACT

The study reported on in this issue was conducted to examine teachers' workload and associated stress. The specifics of the study were: the hours teachers worked during a given week, the tasks which filled those hours, and whether teachers felt stressed during that week. Teachers in 58 primary and 32 secondary schools were asked to complete a questionnaire, The Occupational Stress Indicator, used in industry and with other professional groups to give a general picture of stress. They were also asked to keep a daily diary for one week using a format that divided each day into 15 minute time spans. Analysis of the diaries (570 or 66% returned) and the Occupational Stress Indicator (530 returned) indicated that in the primary sector all stages were fairly equally represented and in the secondary sector all teaching subjects were represented. The teachers' work week tended toward the heavier end of workload (mean of 42.5 hours)and 75 percent reported that they spent more extra time than they considered reasonable. Participants also reported on whether or not they felt stressed, the causes and symptoms of stress, and coping strategies they employed. The survey findings painted a picture of an occupational groups putting in, on an average, an extra day's work over seven days of the survey week; reporting between three and five occasions of stressful feelings in that week; and registering high scores on the measure of occupational stress. (LL)

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TIME AND TASKS: TEACHER WORKLOAD AND STRESS

SPOTLIGHTS 44

by

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Spotlights 44

Time and Tasks: Teacher Workload and Stress

Margaret Johnstone
The Scottish Council for Research in Education

In September 1993 SCRE carried out a study, commissioned by the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), of teachers' workload and associated stress. The survey looked at the hours teachers worked during a specific week, the tasks which filled these hours, and whether the teachers felt stressed during that week. The teachers also completed a questionnaire used in industry and with other professional groups to give a general picture of stress. This enabled teachers' scores to be compared against scores from other occupations. The findings are summarised below.

The SCRE researchers had complete freedom to select the research method and the sample. The approach taken was to ask teachers to keep a daily diary for one week using a format with each day divided into 15 minute time spans, starting at 6 am and finishing at midnight. As it was essential that the diary was easy to use throughout the day, respondents were given codewords to make completion simpler. They were free to add detail or explain work. Although this approach relied on self-report the response overall seemed consistent with the reality of teaching and the codewords did not seem to cause misunderstandings. In short, the information collected seems credible.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Rather than use union membership lists as a source, we randomly selected primary and secondary schools in four Scottish regions, to give a broad and general response. After negotiation, 58 primary (just over half those contacted) and 32 secondary (just under two-thirds of those contacted) schools agreed to take part. Names were then selected from school lists to give representation of class teachers and of school management.

Table 1: The workload diary respondents

	n =	%
Primary teachers	177	31
Secondary teachers	172	30
Management in primary schools	58	10
Senior management in secondary	47	8
Principal teachers—Subject	65	11
—Guidance	42	7
Nursery teachers	8	2
No post given	1	

Of the 860 contacted, 570 (66%) returned *Workload Diaries*. Some 530 completed the *Occupational Stress Indicator* (1). The response came from about two-thirds of those targeted and from enough people to make statistical comparisons possible.

Within the primary sector, all stages were approximately equally represented, including composite classes. Within the secondary sector all teaching subjects were represented, including learning support. More women than men replied and even allowing for the predominantly female primary teaching force, females were marginally over-represented overall. The respondent groups also contained marginally more older teachers, a reflection of the third of the sample in promoted posts. The respondents appeared to be people who were, in the main, settled and experienced with reasonably positive views of their schools. Only 44 people (8%) saw themselves as working outside teaching ten years on.

THE TEACHERS' WEEK

The formal hours established for teaching amount to 27.5 hours per week, plus an overall amount of discretionary hours' work which brings the working week up to 35 hours. The range of hours reported ran from the statutory minimum to a handful of people who recorded over 60 hours work in the week surveyed.

Overall, the response tended towards the heavier end of workload. For the respondents at this early stage in the year, the mean of hours worked in the seven day period surveyed was 42.5 hours. This was seven and a half hours over the 35 hour week. In effect, they had worked a six-day week. These hours excluded any time taken as a break during the school day (such time is not part of teachers' contracted hours). However, the 42.5 hours included work done during breaks. The actual break time taken over the

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school week averaged out at 3.7 hours, or forty-four minutes a day. Work also expanded into evenings or into weekends (though people tried to avoid this). Only 12% of the sample (69 people) recorded no school work at the weekend. On average work time at the weekend was three hours. These figures simply give an idea of the length of the working week. The nature of the work and of the demands made are what make these hours reasonable or unreasonable to the people who work them.

REASONABLE AND TYPICAL WORK

Respondents were also asked what they saw as a reasonable amount *of their own time* to spend on preparation and planning. About half thought that up to five hours extra would be reasonable. Of the remainder, the majority considered that six to ten hours would be reasonable, with a minority setting an even higher target for themselves.

People were then asked to estimate how long they actually spent on preparation and planning in a week. This was only an estimate, but nevertheless the difference between the estimate and what was considered reasonable was striking:

- 75% (427 people) estimated they spent *more* extra time than they saw as reasonable on preparation and planning
- 22% (127) felt that extra time spent matched what they saw as reasonable
- 3% (16) spent *less* extra time than they saw as reasonable.

Those who saw themselves as working unreasonable hours were the same people as those who worked longer hours during the survey week and who reported more experiences of stress. The people in the sample had some sort of workload limit, which seemed to be getting stretched.

Just *over* half saw the survey week as reasonable, just *under* half saw it as unreasonable. This was surprising in a week at the start of the new school year, a week described by one teacher as: "the honeymoon period when everything seems under control and you actually believe you're on top of the job."

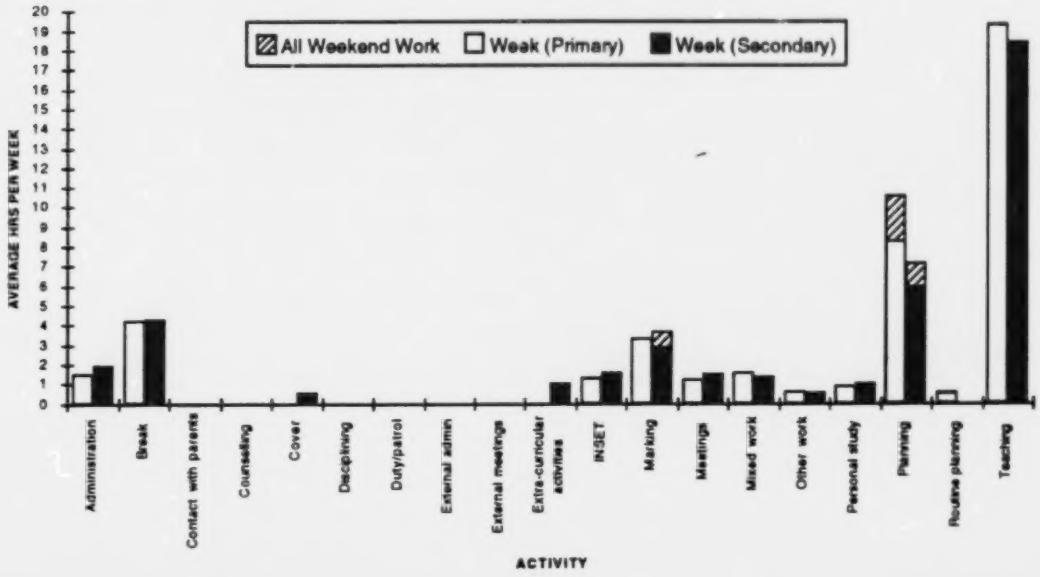
There was a less clear cut response to the question of whether the week had been typical. This perhaps indicates some conflict in expectations of work, and signals the importance of the work tasks themselves. More work is reasonable if the kind of work demanded is reasonable.

THE WORK DONE

The *Workload Diaries* were completed using codewords provided These were simple descriptive words such as PLAN, TEACH, ADMIN. There was a list of these words with explanations of what they meant, and in some cases expansions (for example, ADMIN had a letter code to add if the admin in question was a low-level task such as putting letters in envelopes). Classroom teachers and those with management responsibilities had slightly different lists of codewords given their different range of tasks. The following figures show the broad picture for class teachers and for promoted staff (primary and secondaries are treated together).

For both primary and secondary teachers, Figure 1 under-represents the hours spent teaching. There were some 15-minute time spans when teaching was interrupted, where admin was followed by teaching, where some marking had to be done. These broken time spans were coded by us as MIXED WORK. Teachers themselves may also have decided, when faced with a broken time span, to record the major activity rather than give both. Nevertheless, on counting work in school and work at home, both groups of teachers spent about as much time on work allied to teaching as on direct class teaching itself. If nearly half of a

Figure 1: Classroom teacher time



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teacher's time is to be spent on tasks other than teaching, then teachers have to be convinced that these out-of-classroom tasks are worthwhile.

For senior management (Figure 2) differences emerged in the allocation of time to tasks in primary and secondary schools. As might be expected, secondary school headteachers, with more staff members and a range of departments to manage, spent almost twice the time on meetings as did their primary school colleagues. More surprisingly, there was less of a gap in time spent on administration of the school (ie paperwork demanded by school routines, the collation of information, records). It should be noted that there were a few tasks which, when averaged out over the whole primary or secondary management, accounted for less than half an hour per person per week. For example, most of the hours spent on what could be called secretarial work came from primary school headteachers doing tasks "which are nothing to do with my real work and could be done by a competent auxiliary if only we had such a person."

The pattern of work would be likely to change over the term and over the school year, but for the week of the survey, the tasks of senior management were within the main areas shown.

FEELING STRESSED

The respondents were asked to look back at the day they had just worked, and to report whether or not they felt stressed. They were not given lists of symptoms, or clues as to how they ought to feel. It was left to them to decide what stress was and whether they felt stressed. This open approach means that we have a lot of information about feelings related to work. Whether the stress felt was short-term or long-term, we cannot say, but there was a distinctive pattern over the week as Figure 3 shows.

As this figure graphically displays, stress reports peaked at the early part of the week then tailed down to the low of Saturday, only to rise again on Sunday when, as one typical comment put it "You're thinking about unsolved

Figure 2: Senior promoted staff (headteacher, deputy headteachers, assistant headteachers) time

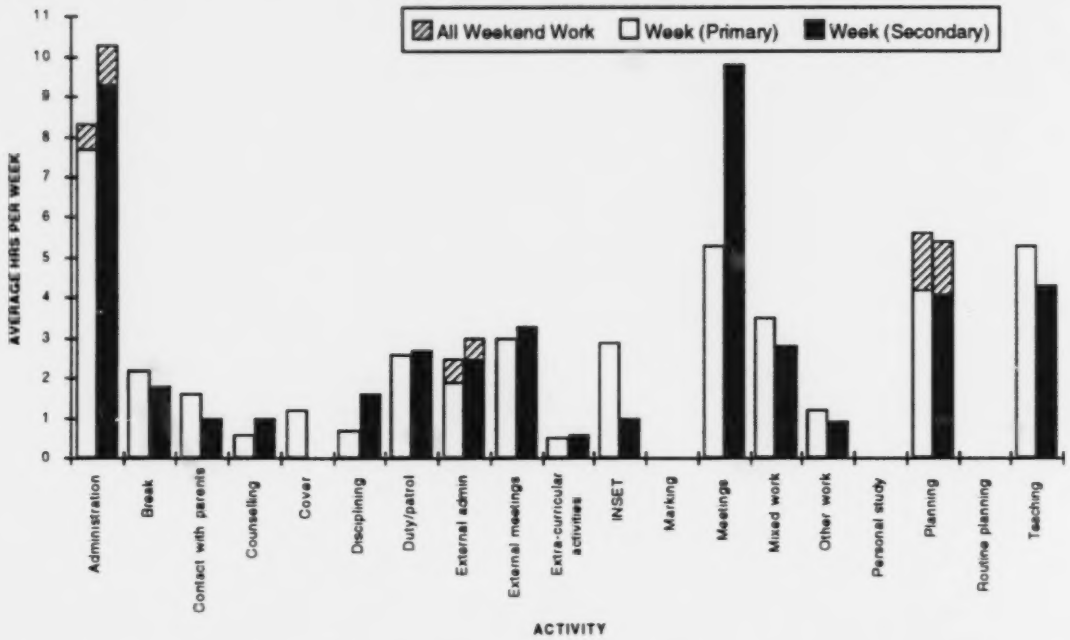
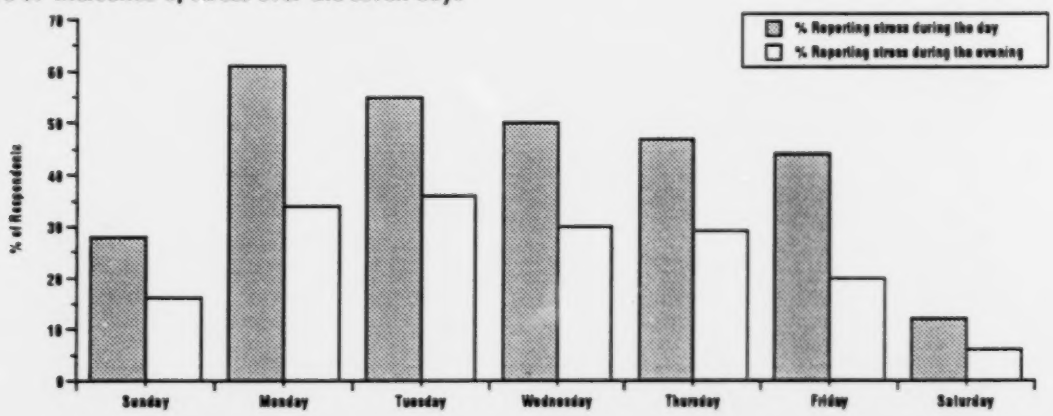


Figure 3: Incidence of stress over the seven days

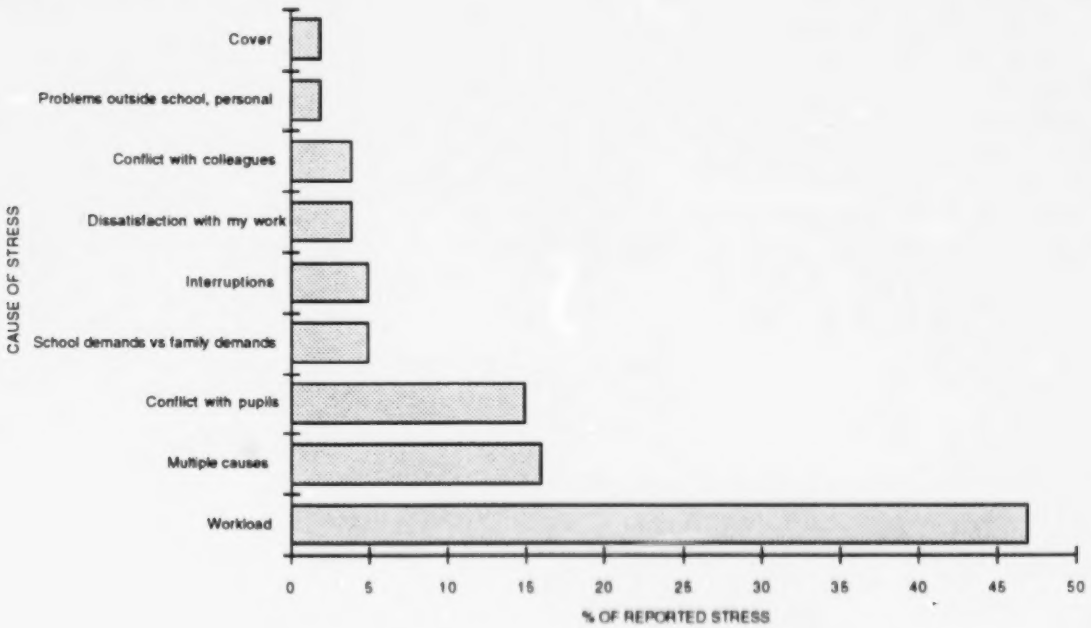


problems from last week, trying to think of solutions and thinking of next week's enormous work load."

CAUSES OF STRESS

When people reported what had caused the stress they felt, it was evident that volume of work, pressures of deadlines for preparation and/ or administrative tasks, the struggle with several tasks all of top priority and the consistent pressure of low priority work, all combined to make a category of stressor called 'workload'. In a research project which is explicitly studying workload, this may seem a self-fulfilling prophecy but, in other researches investigating stress in teaching, workload is always an important factor. A few quotations from class teachers and from senior/ middle management in both primary and secondary schools typify what we called workload:

Figure 4: Reported causes of stress



Class teacher workload stressors

• ...[It's] stressful when you are coping with the breadth of the present curriculum. [I] feel disappointed that I am not coping well with it, having taught since 1976.

• ...too much time on forward plans instead of preparing work for actual lessons.

• ...increased demand for paperwork - a workplan demanded for every class, every term; extra reporting and assessing etc is implied.

Senior management / middle management workload stressors:

• ...a week where there were too many out of school meetings resulting in me trying to catch up and never succeeding.

• ...PAT time *should* have been spent on 5-14 Guidelines but some staff required explanation of other new material.

These ideas were common to the 71% (a total of 405 individuals) who reported workload stress. Other sources of stress were also reported, and Figure 4 shows the relative share of each.

Figure 4 does not give any indication of the strength or impact of specific causes of stress. What it shows is how often each cause was reported. For class teachers, the day-to-day causes of stress were related to tasks other than direct class teaching. For school management, it was extra administration and (in secondary schools particularly) the meetings needed to persuade and encourage staff to adopt various changes.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Respondents were not given a checklist of stress symptoms but were asked to write down how they felt. Broadly speaking, the signs or symptoms fell into two main areas, physical and mental. About half the signs reported were physical (for example headache, stomach ache, or exhaustion). Over a third of were emotional feelings such as panic, depression or anxiety. Common symptoms here were:

• "going over and over things needing to be done."

• "starting one job, then remembering another and doing it and forgetting the original task.

However, the most commonly quoted emotional indicator of stress was anger:

• "I feel like shouting at them [pupils] - am very short tempered."

• "lost my temper with a colleague."

Being on a short fuse is one obvious factor in creating an unsympathetic classroom atmosphere but other signs of stress may also affect pupils.

COPING STRATEGIES

Coping strategies could help defuse feelings of stress. For each of the week days and for Saturday, just under half of those who reported some stress also reported someone or something as helping them to cope. For Sundays, almost two-thirds of those who reported stress also reported help from family or friends. Such help or buffering is a recognised factor in mediating the effects of stress. As might be expected, the help offered or coping strategies adopted varied. Colleagues helped by sharing the burden, and supportive senior staff were praised. Family and, friends helped put things into perspective as did physical activity, hobbies and just relaxing. Increased alcohol or drug consumption is seen as one consequence of stress, or a coping strategy, perhaps. During the survey week, of the people reporting some stress experience or incident, one in twelve was helped by 'a glass of wine' or 'a stiff whisky'. Very few noted any medication, with the exception of paracetamol for headaches.

The coping strategies used present no surprises. What is disquieting is that just over half of those reporting stress said that they had not done anything or had any help to cope with the stress. Perhaps some of these people were in effect saying that they did not need a specific strategy or help. They may have had the psychological 'hardiness' to take stress in their stride. On the other hand they may have been unwilling or unable to admit to stress by sharing their problems or by seeking help. The research could not explore this, but the high percentage reporting stress and also an absence of help is disturbing.

STRESS IN TEACHING AND IN OTHER JOBS

The *Occupational Stress Indicator* is a measure with several scales, each looking at a different aspect of stress. The main points to emerge were:

*Teachers were **less satisfied** than the general population with:*

- the factors intrinsic to the job itself
- the organisational structure or climate in which they worked
- the home/work interface

*Teachers were **more satisfied** with:*

- career and achievement in their job

*They were **more likely** to cope with stress by using:*

- social support (ie seeking advice)

*Teachers were **more likely** to register*

- poorer mental and physical health scores, that is more feelings of worry, upset, or disproportionate irritation, and more sleeplessness, headaches, or increased food, alcohol, or cigarette consumption.

In addition to levels for the general population, there are scores for various occupations: senior police officers, health workers, water company employees, brewery workers, ambulance workers, general practitioners, senior civil servants and university lecturers. The only group which approached the teachers' score on the scale called *factors intrinsic to the job* (mean 33.25) were general practitioners (mean 32.48). Having said this about general occupational stress, it should be added that correlations between the teachers' scores on the *Workload Diary* and on the *Occupational Stress Indicator* were not high. The more day-to-day stress reported in the *Workload Diary*, the higher were scores on the OSI scales measuring pressure from job factors and from conflict between home and work, but correlations were modest.

WHAT DOES THE SURVEY TELL US?

The information from the *Workload Diary* indicated that people were recording, on average, an extra day's work over the seven days of the survey week. People were willing to give their own time but, as longer hours were worked, their personal limit of what was reasonable was being broken. The longer the hours worked, the more day-to-day stress was reported. The largest part of day-to-day stress was attributed to workload, in particular tasks classroom teachers saw as less central to the job of teaching, or tasks senior promoted staff saw as peripheral to the school. A survey can only give a broad picture — but the broad picture here is of an occupational group putting in on average an extra day's work in a quiet period of the year; reporting between three and five occasions of stressful feelings in that week; and registering high scores on a measure of occupational stress.

Notes:

1. *Occupational Stress Indicator* (Cooper, Sloan and Wilson). NFER/Nelson, 1988.
2. The findings were released by the EIS in November 1993. The report *Teachers' Workload and Associated Stress* is available as a SCRE Research Report, price £5.00.

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